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**MOTHERING A NATION:**

**THE GENDERED MEMORY OF KENYA'S *MAU MAU* REBELLION**

**APPROVED BY**

**SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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**Matt Richardson**

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**Xavier Livermon**

**MOTHERING A NATION:  
THE GENDERED MEMORY OF KENYA'S *MAU MAU* REBELLION**

**by**

**Wanjira Murimi, BA**

**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

In honor of my grandmother, mother, and sister.

This work is dedicated to all the women warriors who love, organize, create,  
and fight for their lives' memories, presents, and futures.

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## **Abstract**

# **MOTHERING A NATION: THE GENDERED MEMORY OF KENYA'S MAU MAU REBELLION**

Wanjira Murimi, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Matt Richardson

This paper approaches fiction as a site of gendered history and memory and presents two pieces of literature by Kenyan authors - *Passbook Number F.47927* by Muthoni Likimani and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo - as examples of countermemory production that disrupt dominant and colonially and post-colonially perpetuated narratives of Kenya's fight for independence within the context of the *Mau Mau* uprisings. I assert that historical fiction can be a medium of challenge and disruption of hegemonically formed reports of history, reweaving into the tapestry of national memory voices forgotten or excised. I posit that this contestation of history and memory through countermemory can be an ethical and feminist project. However, countermemory, much like the history and memory it challenges, does not exist in a vacuum, and is subject to structures of power that may result in its being participant and enacting of oppressive power. Using gender as a lens, I

elucidate the ways in which both these pieces participate in and challenge heteropatriarchal notions of manhood and womanhood as resistance strategies for nation building.



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# INTRODUCTION

The process of history production reproduces the constant struggle of various memories and the inevitability that in a particular remembering, some narratives will be lost, especially when geared toward the project of nation making- in this case, forming an ostensibly independent Kenya from the ashes of a colonial past. The “multiplicity of memory” enables recollection in spite of its contestable state and creates avenues for countermemory and rescue of silences and representation.<sup>1</sup> All memory has a history, and a present memory of any given instance is multifaceted in place and time.<sup>2</sup> History and memory as access to the past is a construction created in terms of the dominant group performing the recollection; it is a process of invention and appropriation, and so the notion of fact fades in light of this flux state of truth and different truths. Historical fiction is useful in questioning hegemonically formed reports of history Kenyan historical fiction exposes how the history and memory of the nation has been influenced by those in power manipulating collective memories to create expedient national narratives. Historical fiction serves as a site of memory, often threatening to statist narratives, and its performance an access point for suppressed individual and social memories to be recovered and ingrained into the collective memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," 1399.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, "Introduction," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 2.

I approach the formation of nation as a flawed and incomplete archive of collective memory, created from dominant statist narratives that silence and suppress memories that would challenge its power. I posit works of historical fiction as tools of remembrance, in this case the creative imaginary of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Muthoni Likimani's *Passbook F.47927*, as the language through which we call up national memory. These are acts of "performance, representation, and interpretation" that represent and contribute to collective memory.<sup>3</sup> I use historical fiction to grapple with how memory is preserved and remembered, how they affect cultural memory, and identify what is forgotten at the individual and social levels of memory. Historical fiction becomes a potential language of recalling dismembered memory, weaving its countermemory into the thread of post-colonial Kenya. What is forgotten, censored, silenced, and contested, because of the power hierarchies that create spaces and sites of memory, is then allowed rescuing in the space of countermemory.<sup>4</sup> Countermemory emerges as a concept that speaks to memory's constant state of flux of truths and alternative truths. I use the historical fiction as the countermemory medium in which to explore memory and mythologization and the ways in which Kenya's memorialization of the *Mau Mau* rebellion is reconstructed in the creative and national imagination.

Gender is my principle lens, vested in the recovery of women's agency and full presence in the history and memory of nation making, and thus vested in their access to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

citizenship. Women's voices, particularly Black women's voices, are often elided from history, denied the presence of their voices in narratives of rebellion, war, and liberation which robs them of their place in the nation and compounds the denial of their access to citizenship.<sup>5</sup> I focus my scope on evaluating the use of countermemory, and its effectiveness or lack thereof in the work to disrupt gendered power structures that form history and nation. Particularly, I compare wa Thiong'o and Likimani's work, both examples of countermemory and evaluate their transformation of collective memory while critiquing shortfalls of gender consideration.

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<sup>5</sup> Cheryl McEwan, "Building a Postcolonial Archive? Gender, Collective Memory and Citizenship in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 741.

## Background

The *Mau Mau* uprisings of 1952 emerged as a military effort in response to oppressive British colonial land, tax, and economic policies.<sup>6</sup> The *Mau Mau* fighters consisted of mainly Kikuyu, who were primarily displaced from prime land ownership by the British located in highlands of Kenya, in desirable and arable Central Province.<sup>7</sup> Further fueled by dissatisfaction with Kenyan anti-colonial activists, the *Mau Mau* emerged as an extreme faction of anti-colonial efforts, engaging guerilla military tactics in the fight against the British colonial system in Kenya.<sup>8</sup> The British colonial government implemented two strategies against the rebellion. The first was to send security forces into the highlands of Kenya in Central Province, the homeland of the Kikuyu who comprised the majority of the *Mau Mau*.<sup>9</sup> The second British strategy was a directed against what they perceived as the civilian enemy. They employed a system of land grabbing, surveillance, and arrests with the help of locally placed British officers and Kenyan loyalists to carry out this strategy.<sup>10</sup> The British colonial government targeted Kikuyu civilians they perceived to be participant as civilian support to the *Mau Mau*, amounting to about 1.5 million Kikuyu they believed to have taken the *Mau Mau* oath and pledged support to the *Mau Mau* rebellion.<sup>11</sup> The British ran the Kikuyu

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<sup>6</sup> David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged : The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*, 1st American ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya : An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 24.

<sup>8</sup> David W. Throup, "The Origins of *Mau Mau*," *African Affairs* 84, no. 336 (1985): 425.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning : The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, 1st ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), xi.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

districts in Kenya to as police states and during the course of this second strategy, the British colonial government held over 150,000 Kikuyu in detention camps.<sup>12</sup> The British would continue to arrest and detain those they classed as supporters of the *Mau Mau* as late as 1960, just three years before Kenya's declaration of independence.<sup>13</sup> The British portrayed the *Mau Mau* rebellion as a savage "anti-European and anti-Christian sect" dedicated to terrorizing white settlers and violently interrupting the British colonial project in Kenya; this sentiment was prevalent even within Kenya's new government formed in 1963.<sup>14</sup>

### **On History and Memory**

History and memory are dynamically tied together and build upon each other's development, "it is memory that dictates while history writes," and in turn memory is affected by the recorded history, creating an ever dynamic cycle.<sup>15</sup> The roles they play are what are separate: memory being in the present, constantly shifting in sites of memories and spaces while history is the recorded or erased temporal relationships between things, people and places. History is the reconstitution and the recording of memory and is "always problematic and incomplete" because of the ways memory is vulnerable to silencing and appropriation- and this contestability begets contestability.<sup>16</sup> Memory is formed at the individual, social, and collective level and is often rife with pockets of silence and 'forgotten' spaces at each of these levels. The attribution of

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged : The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (Oxford; Athens: j. Currey ; Ohio University Press, 1997), 220.

<sup>14</sup> Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning : The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, xi.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux De Mémoire*, Bibliothèque Illustrée Des Histoires. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

memory is observed in three concurrent perspectives, “to oneself, to one’s close relations, and to others”; this is understood as: individual, social, and collective memories build on each other.<sup>17</sup> Memory is a collective function.<sup>18</sup> Collective memory is the preservation of lived experience given added depth according to the individual memories that fed it.<sup>19</sup> Memory is not an “un-changing vessel for carrying the past into the present,” but is an evolution of processes that work differently, dependent on different points in time.<sup>20</sup> This speaks to the assertion that positions collective memory as “a conceptualization that expresses a sense of the continual presence of the past” and history as the narratives of the past archived in the present.<sup>21</sup>

Accessing that history in the present is a lived experience that creates another facet of the collective memory, as in the revisiting of *Mau Mau* history in literature. As memory exists as a project of the present, it is jaded by that positionality as “only those elements of the past that correspond” to the present are prioritized in the recollection.<sup>22</sup> History and memory are tied to the silences created by repression and suppression, silence and forgetting.<sup>23</sup> Encountering these omissions suggests a contestability of memory and history, and requires methods that create or rescue these counter-memories,

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 132.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory*, Heritage of Sociology. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 183.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1373.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey K. Robbins Joyce Olick, "Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual review of sociology* 24 (1998): 122.

<sup>21</sup> Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," 1373.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Knapp, "Collective Memory and the Actual Past," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 131.

<sup>23</sup> David William Cohen, *The Combining of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7.

always prone to the “dialectic of remembering and forgetting”, always in consideration of dynamics of power and privilege that direct what is remembered and what is forgotten- “it is who wants whom to remember what, and why”.<sup>24,25</sup> That one kind of memory emerges might mean another memory has been disallowed space. In examining the archives as sites of memory for history production, it is necessary to account for the nuances in power and privilege; this may require a re-examining of memory collection, a revisiting of the evidence, from a countermemory perspective in order to highlight a missed narrative.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nora, *Les Lieux De Mémoire*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1393.

<sup>26</sup> Ruramisai Charumbira, "Nehanda and Gender Victimhood in the Central Mashonaland 1896–97 Rebellions: Revisiting the Evidence," *History in Africa* 35, no. 1 (2008): 103-31.



## CHAPTER 1: THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI

Based on true events, wa Thiong'o and his co-playwright Micere Mugo wrote *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* to dramatize the *Mau Mau* leader's trial and execution in a bid to counter the erasure of the *Mau Mau* movement's importance in Kenya and the criminalization of the uprisings and its participants in Kenyan histories. The popularity of the performance and publication of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* over the ensuing five years caused so much controversy as to result in the arrest and detention of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.<sup>27</sup> Following his arrest, nationwide state sponsored censorship of drama festivals in Kenya ensued and the performance school with which wa Thiong'o was associated, known for producing controversial "national plays" was demolished.<sup>28</sup> The authors perform a memorial recovery of Kimathi and the *Mau Mau* movement's narrative in their play, placing him as clear protagonist in the face of violent British opposition in response to condemnation of the *Mau Mau* post-independence from the late 1960s onward.

Born Kimathi wa Waciuri, Dedan Kimathi was a prominent within the *Mau Mau* movement, as Field Marshal he is credited with leading the armed offense in resistance to

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<sup>27</sup> "Mau Mau after Thirty Years," *Race & Class : the Journal of the Institute of Race Relations* 24, no. 3 (1983): 262.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

British colonial control of land and people.<sup>29</sup> For his purported crimes against the colonial state, Kimathi was captured, expediently tried, and executed in 1957.<sup>30</sup> By casting Kimathi and his warriors as freedom fighters, emblematic of true Kenyan spirit, wa Thiong'o produced a countermemory specifically recovered to threaten state and neocolonial narratives that presented a sanitized version of history that favored the British government and benefitted the neocolonial partnerships of the Kenyan government with Britain. Notably, the play ends with a Swahili freedom fight song affirming the *Mau Mau* mission to fight for freedom to the death; however, the song, set after the execution of Kimathi which according to the British ended the uprising, implies an unfinished work, dangerously resonant in the politics of Kenya where neocolonialist policies are favored by the new government.<sup>31</sup> In addition to sharing this truth, wa Thiong'o grapples with the possibilities of a native anthropology: a "consideration of perspectives, philosophies and systems of logic generated by populations which are usually expected to produce only unrefined data for the omniscient, powerful stranger to interpret".<sup>32</sup> His intentions are to redefine what is acceptable as history by redefining methods of history archiving through the elucidation of Kenyan people's own capacities for insight and analysis of their own lives and cultural identities.

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<sup>29</sup> Carl Gustav Rosberg and John Cato Nottingham, *The Myth of "Mau Mau"; Nationalism in Kenya* (Stanford, Calif.: Published for the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace by Praeger, New York, 1966), 298-300.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 84.

<sup>32</sup> John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso* (New York: Random House, 1980).

## The Construction of M(other) Kenya

These strategies are counter to traditional, often hegemonic, knowledge and memory gathering methods. The play recovers nostalgia as a method from the British adeptly managing it as a form of creating connection in collective memories, rescuing narratives of violence, exile, and resistance in an effort to remember narratives displaced by power.<sup>33</sup> Though women are acknowledged as having taken part in the *Mau Mau* revolt, most histories and other reconstitutions situate them as hazy supportive figures, usually wives and sometime couriers. In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the women are allegory, not multi-dimensional human characters with individual motivations outside the larger nationalist project. Though women circle the plot, their roles are primary as supportive to the men- he both acknowledges their presence, and their usefulness in the war while still maintaining their namelessness and structuring their motives around encouraging and supporting the men toward a decisive action. Despite the presence of women in the play- rather simply named “Woman” and “Girl” while characters as minor as white colonial guards receive names- their purpose in the plot is symbolic. The primary concern, for the women, for the play, is the release of Dedan Kimathi who represents the release of Kenya from colonial rule.<sup>34</sup> Their pasts outside of this projected are a warning of aimlessness without cause, a punitive result of a lack of morality- or rather a lack of patriotism as a lack of morality; the women in this play are only allowed either the status of lauded national mothers or shameful whores.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>34</sup> Elleke Boehmer, "The Master's Dance to the Master's Voice: Revolutionary Nationalism and the Representation of Women in the Writing of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 26, no. 1 (1991): 190.

The Woman is the narrator of Kenya's story- this is not her story, it is Dedan Kimathi's story, it is the Boy's story, it is the nation's story, for which she exists only as bearer, conduit, and womb; mother of Kenya, or as I situate her, Mother Kenya.<sup>35</sup> The Woman's description before she enters the play is indicative of the author's vision of Mother Kenya: "A woman walks across the stage. She is between thirty and forty years of age, with a mature but youthful face, strongly built... she wears a peasant woman's clothes and is barefoot... fearless determination and a spirit of daring is her character. She is versatile and full of energy... a mother, a fighter, all in one".<sup>36</sup> Between thirty and forty, Mother Kenya is obviously of child bearing age, not a girl or young woman either, emblematic of the wisdom of the older woman, but eternal, "of youthful face, strongly built" indicating a young nation, but one bearing the wisdom of its past, and stronger for its foundations. She is clothed in a peasant woman's clothes, the quintessential Kenyan rural everywoman- and she must be rural not urban as the urban is European and disconnected from land discourse while the rural is farms, tradition, and culture- who carries her load from the river from the market, barefoot and ground into the dirt, grounded in the land, a primary reason for the rebellion being land rights and Kenyan ownership of Kenyan land.

Her life before 'answering the call' of patriotism is alluded to with shame: "I was a bad woman... a lost stinking life... until I heard the call," the implication being that was she not married, rather independent, perhaps even doing sex work to survive as was

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<sup>35</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 8.

common for women in the city during the Emergency<sup>37</sup> Assumed to be morally reprehensible, her life only gains true worth when she answers the call of “the humiliated, the injured, the insulted, the exploited, the submerged millions of laboring men and women of Kenya,” and gives her life up to the cause of nationalism.<sup>38</sup> We never see her do any fighting herself. We never learn her name. To construct this symbol of Mother Kenya, what must be first erased is the individual identity of the Woman as the “the construction of nationalism requires a narration of national identity that attempts to override the experiences of the national citizen” and there must “always be a gap between the ideal image of the nation and the actual performance of the nation in the lives of the subjects” within it. Through the Woman, through Mother Kenya, the narrative is created that supports the author’s particular brand of nationalism and as such she builds or rather raises Dedan Kimathi, raises the Boy, raises Kenya.<sup>39</sup>

The ‘Girl’ who is “young but has undoubtedly seen life and hard times,” is first introduced to us as a thief, and her life is currently reflective of the Woman’s own past.<sup>40</sup> “She is being pursued by the Boy when we meet her, and the Woman only manages to appeal for her release successfully when she reframes the Girl as the Boy’s symbolic kin, and one who should fall under his protection: “Shame on you. A big boy, well, a young man like you! And you want to kill your sister! Your own mother’s daughter!”<sup>41</sup> This is a

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, "Queer Ecologies Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire," (2010): 311.

<sup>40</sup> wa Thiong'o and Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 15.

mother's rebuke to her son. The Woman's interactions with the Boy are immediately maternal, scolding and feeding him: "Sit down and eat slowly. If I were your mother, I would have you wash... and teach you how to eat".<sup>42</sup> The Boy responds with "I have no mother," which is meant to be symbolic of his lack of direction, caused by his lack of investment and participation in the fight for Kenya. She takes his mother's place and begins to raise him down the path of nationalism, urging him to answer "the call" as an answer to his aimlessness, "the call of our people... the humiliated, the injured, the insulted, the exploited, the submerged millions" of Kenya. Claiming him for her mission Mother Kenya urges him, "that day, my son, you'll become a man... just now you are a beast" roaming directionless.<sup>43</sup> Her disembodied voice follows the Boy, often reappearing to fortify him against fear and doubt, encouraging him toward manhood as only a mother can.<sup>44</sup> He hears her every time he wavers in his mission, "No, no, not now, Mama/But how can I turn/Against her call/And/Live?"<sup>45</sup> The Woman is set up as cunning, "world-wise," and intelligent, performing femininity for the white homeguard who interrogates her so that he may be pleased with her supplication and feminine submissiveness" and let her go.<sup>46</sup> However, whatever potential for the play to revolve around her story is crushed when she meets 'Boy' who represents the next generation of Kenya's fighting sons, and rallies him into action: "It should be symbolic, the Woman now represents Kenyan mothers talking to their children" as well as Mother Kenya

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 10.

talking to her citizen sons.<sup>47</sup> The narrator introduces the Woman: “A mother, a fighter, all in one.”<sup>48</sup> However, we see her mother all throughout the play, mothering multiple characters at that, but we do not see her fight. Her last scene is her arrest, led away in handcuffs as a distraction, her purpose fulfilled as she sacrifices her freedom to give birth to the Boy’s heroic arc.

Her interactions with Dedan Kimathi are no less maternal. He lauds her acts of resistance but couches it all in terms of what a mother would do for her children, not necessarily what a woman would do out of her own investment in freedom. All that she has done, she did for others, for her sons: “Do you see this woman? How many tasks has she performed without complaint... how many people has she snatched from jails, from colonial jaws of death? How many brave warriors has she recruited?” Speaking to the men, he praises her courage and dedication to what he terms “our struggle,” it is not her struggle, it is theirs, the men, these sons in the forest resisting, and her commitment to her sons is what stands out in her action: “...Come forward, mother of people...”<sup>49</sup> The passion with which she encourages him is all about his feelings: “ she looks at Kimathi. Then she starts slowly working herself into a passion as if trying to still the doubt wavering in Kimathi’s heart.”<sup>50</sup> As with the Boy, Kimathi turns to her in moments of doubt and weakness, and as a mother to a son she reminds him of the history, of his

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

fulfilment of manhood being caught up in the raising of Kenya into a nation- and it is made clear that this is her primary purpose within the narrative.

While women are written into the history of the *Mau Mau* war, their role is often passive, or otherwise subject to men's motivations and their evolution. When their thoughts and ambitions are brought into the foreground, they are morphed into symbols of the nation- their voice is not their own, instead it is Kenya's voice. The space for women is limited, they are only either motherland or mothers of Kenya's sons- bound by this duty and motivated primarily by these roles. They are not individuals; they are Woman, Mother, Sister- value decided by how they relate to men and the nation. Their power to motivate the men lies either in their sexuality, which is always deviant, or their inhabitation of maternal roles, which are always lauded but nonetheless dehumanize them. Womanhood is partitioned into two halves of their lives: 1) girlhood- where even when independent motivation may be found, it is their sexuality that is of prime concern and often is read in desolation and deserving punitive measure; 2) motherhood, where they live as inspirational figures for the men to remember the nation through and often for the men to be motivated into action by the violation of their Mother.

### **Masculinity and Homosocial Desire in the Mythology of Dedan Kimathi**

The men in this play are not exempt from a gendered representation. In fact, too often gender analysis is often used to examine women or the feminine, just like race is often implied to mean an examination of non-whiteness. The authors of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* have particular investment in this kind of masculinity, what can be



described as a “deeply entrenched in a macho conviviality” with Dedan Kimathi’s character presented as the ideal representation of Kenyan masculinity that must be aspired to and the mythos carried on in the spirit of boys and men to come after him.<sup>51</sup> In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta, who would later become Kenya’s first president (and long thought to be associated with the *Mau Mau*) explains an aspect ritual ceremony for attaining eldership and position in the peace council among the Kikuyu. A man who achieves this position is no longer allowed to be “a carrier of spear and shield,” with clear implication being that one would have had to be an exemplary warrior to gain enough distinction and respect to rise to this position.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, a ceremonial male goat is slaughtered, its sexual organs cut off and ritually prepared, “then it is slit and worn as a bracelet” by the newly initiated elder as a pledge of peace, “for the sexual organ is considered as the driving factor in fierceness, and having been symbolically cut away and placed on the wrist” the man is no longer a warrior, his vigor, his manhood having been aged out into eldership.<sup>53</sup>

While elders are respected, they are not as venerated as the warrior whose prowess military matters indicate his sexuality, his ultimate masculinity. The sexual and the martial coincide with one another, and in the warrior mythos are near as one.<sup>54</sup> Dedan Kimathi, at the time the play is set in stands as the ultimate man, the eternal warrior,

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<sup>51</sup> Charles C. Fonchingong, "Unbending Gender Narratives in African Literature," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8 (2006): 135.

<sup>52</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya : The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 195.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 195-96.

<sup>54</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, "The Warrior Tradition and the Masculinity of War," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 12, no. 1 (1977): 71.

homoerotically idealized and fantasized over by the men he inspires. Kimathi is often spoken of with awe and desire, in a conversation between The Woman and The Boy, they present this image of Kimathi as godlike, unfettered, and even eternal:

WOMAN: Listen carefully. Dedan Kimathi has been captured.

BOY: So they say. But is it true what they also say?

WOMAN: What?

BOY: [*becoming really excited*]: They say... they say he used to talk with God.

WOMAN: Yes. The fighting god in us—the oppressed ones.

BOY: They say... they say that he could crawl on his belly for ten miles or more.

WOMAN: He had to be strong—for us—because of us Kenyan people.

BOY: They say... they say that he could change himself into a bird, an aeroplane, wind, anything?

WOMAN: Faith in a cause can work miracles.

BOY: They say... they say that the tree under which he used to pray fell to the ground?

WOMAN: There are people my child with blessed blood. And when something happens to them, the wind, and the rain, and the sun, will tell. Even hyenas. Their death can shake mountains and give life to volcanoes long thought to be dormant.

BOY: Maybe they only captured his shadow, his outer form... don't you think?... and let his spirit abroad, in arms.

[...]

WOMAN: ...Would you like to run a mission for Kimathi?

BOY: My life: what would I not give?<sup>55</sup>

For The Boy, Kimathi's capture is immaterial, and possibly false. As he begins to ask questions he is written as "becoming really excited," his excitement mounting as he

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<sup>55</sup> wa Thiong'o and Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, 20-21.

asks evermore fantastical questions of The Woman about Kimathi, who does not once deny him his fantasy, confirming Kimathi's virility as one who "gives life to volcanoes long thought to be dormant."<sup>56</sup> There will be no peaceful retirement for Kimathi, and even his physical capture by British colonial forces leaves his warrior mythos intact. In some ways, ensures it, as even unto his eventual death, Kimathi's spirit remains "abroad, in arms" which exemplifies the masculine ideal for The Boy: a warrior, a man who remains vigorous even beyond a physical death, no longer just speaking to "the fighting God" but has become "the fighting God in all of us."<sup>57</sup> As for The Woman, she does her work as she is relegated to do in the plot, building up The Boy for his mission, reminding him of his responsibility to become a man.

"Rwimbo Rwa Kimathi":

When our Kimathi ascended/Into the mountain alone  
He asked for strength and courage/To defeat the whiteman  
He said that we should tread/ the paths that he had trodden/ that we should follow  
his steps/ and drink from his cup of courage  
If you drink from this cup of courage/ the cup that I have drunk from myself/ It is  
a cup of pain and sorrow/ a cup of tears and death and freedom..."<sup>58</sup>

In the song sung for the hero of the story, *Rwimbo rwa Kimathi* (Song of Kimathi), the forest fighters, ostensibly warriors in their own right, reveal their own homoerotic desire, naming him "our Kimathi," and accepting the call he makes to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

achieve ultimate manhood.<sup>59</sup> They strive to “tread the paths that he had trodden” and “drink from his cup,” take him in, and have Kimathi fill them up with the spirit of the fighting god.<sup>60</sup> The lifeblood of the resistance and creation of a free Kenyan nation, the men expose the ways in which “sentiments of nationalism require a form of attachment” that is often operated through the erotic.”<sup>61</sup> Manipulating the resistance and striving for nation as their object of desire, the men can then interact and engage with homoerotic masculinities in this manner without threatening their manhood- assumed to be, and made necessary to be vigorously heterosexual.<sup>62</sup> The aggressive heteromascularity they strive for is subverted by their own expressions of desire, evoking a kind of homoerotic- in a space created by these men for each other and of course Dedan Kimathi, a space they themselves have cordoned off from women. While women might be the “biological reproducers of nation” and the men their protectors and inseminators, that reproduction is first made possible within the resistance through this homosocial class of the warrior and the myth that holds him up.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Bruce Erickson, ““Fucking Close to Water”: Queering the Production of the Nation,” in *Queer Ecologies Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 313.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>63</sup> Andil Gosine, “Non-White Reproduction and Same-Sex Eroticism: Queer Acts against Nature,” *ibid.*, 156.

## CHAPTER 2: PASSBOOK NUMBER F.47927

### Likimani's Mother Kenya

I explore what role women had in the war, as told in popular fiction, beyond the nameless characters in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Informing my analysis is Muthoni Likimani's *Passbook Number F.47927*, authored by a woman invested in remembering the rebellion through her eyes, and the eyes of other Kenyan women in order to center their narratives within Kenya's nation building. These are women's stories, told in their words and carrying their names throughout, an antidote to collective memory that has eliminated women's names, stories, humanities, and voices from these histories. Muthoni Likimani uses women's memory to challenge collective memory excision of women from the national memory of the war and Kenya's achievement of independence, investing in their material realities that threaten their constructions as purely vessels of nation creation.

I posit that emphasizing the role of women in the *Mau Mau* movement, and staking gender as my primary countermemory mission, challenges ideas of genderless history. Understanding that statist narratives are "constructed within the context of specific challenges to power," I proceed on the position that the erasure of particular facets of identity, like gender, from national history formation is intentional and invested in sustaining systems of power. This occurs even in countermemory projects that subvert dominant powers, as with *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, but still remain participant in

oppressive practice.<sup>64</sup> Erasure of women's narratives and place create incomplete if not outright false memory. In regions working to recreate and recover histories developed within a colonist and imperialist framework, the rescuing and remembering of silenced histories might open the memory to similar violence.<sup>65</sup> Among the *Mau Mau* rebels and the detainees, were women and young girls.<sup>66</sup> However, most collective memory of the *Mau Mau* either ignores women's roles—both in the movement and their memories in the formation of collective memory of the *Mau Mau*—or sidelines them to cursory mentions in a few pages, their presence as either support or afterthought. This writing strategy relegates women to the margins of movements such as this and implicitly situates gender as a marginal issue in the production of history.

Important to note, however, is that individual memory is in itself a product of collective memory. Since the creation and “impression and each fact” is affected by the collective memory, the individual is a faceted impression of the collective.<sup>67</sup> I refute the notion that women play “a negligible role” in the production of history and instead argue that women maintain their own accounts of national histories.<sup>68</sup> They maintain them outside the norms of what is acceptable- outside standards of chronology and managed in tactical systems of forgetting and remembering.<sup>69 70</sup> Individual memory is indelibly

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Roberts, "History and Memory: The Power of Statist Narratives," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 3 (2000): 516.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen, *The Combing of History*, 243.

<sup>66</sup> Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya : An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*, 145.

<sup>67</sup> Halbwachs and Coser, *On Collective Memory*, 53.

<sup>68</sup> Erickson, ""Fucking Close to Water": Queering the Production of the Nation," 313.

<sup>69</sup> Werewere Liking, *The Amputated Memory : A Song-Novel* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2007), 430.

connected to collective memory- in fact there exists an infinite dynamic relationship between individual and collective memory, where one feeds the other.<sup>71</sup> These archives of individual memory provide a window to explore the effect of individual memory on collective memory.<sup>72</sup> Individual memory persists in tension with the dominant narratives.<sup>73</sup> Likimani questions the historical actuality of the partial memories-assembled by power, here assembled by both the colonial and wa Thiong'o- and resituates women presence in national history and memory. I situate Likimani's work as an assertion of women's position within the national history and memory. Through the use of countermemory, Likimani creates space for women's contribution to history and memory formation of the *Mau Mau*. The women in her work define their own subjectivity and speak their own complex personhood reflective of the ways they "negotiated the always coercive and subtle complexities" of power.<sup>74</sup>

Likimani provides a unique entre into the *Mau Mau* war, re-centering history around women's experiences and their roles in forming a national history. The focus is not just on nationalism and anti-colonial effort, but looks instead at nationalism at the intersection of gender. What are women's investments if any in nationalist efforts? What do they leave out of the effort as a matter of necessity? What are their priorities in this

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<sup>70</sup> Heidi Gengenbach, "Naming the Past in a 'Scattered' Land: Memory and the Powers of Women's Naming Practices in Southern Mozambique," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 3 (2000): 529.

<sup>71</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 131.

<sup>72</sup> Anna Green, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates," *Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 41.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters : Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 150.

movement? Likimani elucidates the fact that women came into this fight for their own reasons, not just as a matter of being swept up by their menfolk- with Kenyan women's inspirations and aspirations for the future of Kenya. The women display an investment in thinking through questions of duty and nationalism for themselves, particularly as it concerns what they choose their priorities to be: self, security, family, community, and land.

### **On Passing for Mother Kenya**

“As a woman you must be the wife of a passbook holder or must be legitimately employed”<sup>75</sup> The status of Kenyan women here under colonialism is clearly implied in this short statement. Furthermore, employment could only be legally achieved with the possession of a passbook, or at least immediate filing for a passbook with the assistance of your employer.<sup>76</sup>

Due to the gendered nature of these new laws, many women in Nairobi did not qualify for passbooks, instead they would have to become Passbook Wives, and rely on either unmarried men or men whose wives had remained in the rural areas, and pretend to be their wives while in the city.<sup>77</sup> Likimani's protagonist in the titular chapter of the book, Wacu, is caught up in this new passbook law. Previously employed as an *ayah*, housemaid, by a white colonist who leaves just before the new passbook laws are passed to combat the presence of *Mau Mau* in the city, Wacu is left stranded in the city without papers. She is a runaway from her village life- having left her husband to the disgrace of her brothers who resented the loss of wealth from her dowry; moreover, her estranged

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<sup>75</sup> Muthoni G. Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927 : Women and Mau Mau in Kenya* (New York: Praeger, 1985), 40.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 42.



husband is a popular home guard- a loyalist Kenyan working for the colonial government who at best is likely to arrest her as a terrorist and at worst kill her.<sup>78</sup> Likimani uses Wacu's life to depict how fraught women's lives were under patriarchal intersecting structures of family and state: "Living in Nairobi is impossible without a passbook. To get a passbook I have to get a letter from my employer, or have a husband to sign for me".<sup>79</sup>

Despite her situation, Wacu is not written into a corner as a subjugated victim. Her thoughts are consistently present throughout the narrative and center her motivation and drive to survive. In emphasis, Wacu swears that she "would rather die" than return to the village and lose the agency she'd managed to carve out for herself in the city.<sup>80</sup> To save herself, Wacu is seen to place herself at the mercy of an old boyfriend, Irungu. She presents herself as relatively helpless and entirely at his mercy, the picture of helpless femininity, alone and in tears without a man to protect her. It is arguable that she manifests herself as helpless to achieve her goal by preying on Irungu's own gendered assumptions of not only her femininity but his own standards of masculinity, and in fact his help is given with the statement of "I am a man, we have to do something" moved by the vision of Wacu's "beautiful face, covered in tears," manipulating his perceived responsibility as a man to rescue her from her position.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

Kenyan women who were not married or employed and deigned to leave their villages and rural beginnings were automatically assumed to be morally reprehensible- the ‘legitimacy’ of employment in question here being that it was upon them to prove they weren’t prostitutes- and that their only way to do so was to remain in the country (the assumption here being that they were to be subordinate to their fathers) or live as wives or otherwise subordinate to a man in the city. Even as they implement the plan to make her a Passbook Wife, Wacu is nearly ruined as her presentation bucks colonial ideas of the ragged, worn Kenyan wife and mother; when applying for a Passbook her interviewer wonders: “ ‘Tell me Wacu, why is it that you are more clean than any of the other wives I have seen. Your cleanliness, the way you dress, the way you shine, you don’t look like somebody’s wife’ ”.<sup>82</sup> Wacu is questioned for her being too clean and too smartly dressed, accused of unacceptably presenting as “a free woman, or a working woman” attempting to rob her of legitimacy while at the same time legitimizing his consumption of her desirability as she cannot possibly be tied to a man and be attractive.<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, the plan works, but Likimani very clearly alerts the reader to the cost of the doubly patriarchal system women must navigate through. Notably, Irungu has another wife in the village who takes care of his children and family plot of land, Wacu’s new identity subsumes Irungu’s unnamed traditionally legitimate wife- Wacu is now the “mother of eight children, while the rightful mother, and the rightful wife” is rather

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

condemned to the village.<sup>84</sup> While the ingenuity of the Passbook Wife is laudable, the cost of another woman's erasure as necessary to the success of the ruse remains a fact that cannot be overlooked. For her broader project, however, Likimani highlights women's ingenuity in response to constantly unsafe circumstances when her narrator remarks on how women "made a small bag with a strap, that they hung around their necks" to always be in possession of their passbook, even when in their homes which weren't much safer than the streets.<sup>85</sup> Likimani makes clear that the passbook is not a freedom pass, but acts more like a collar marking women as submitted and surveilled; "Wacu's passbook always hung around her beautiful neck," always wearing her precious burden of proof, "like a precious gold chain," but a chain nonetheless.<sup>86,87</sup> The passbook is no kind of autonomy but a marker of ownership by the colonial state, and as a woman, Wacu's legitimacy even within that precious passbook hangs heavy with the weight of the heteropatriarchal colonial gaze.

### **The Impossibility of *Komerera***

"Komerera is a Kikuyu word meaning 'lie low, keep out of trouble'. People used it as a slogan during Emergency time. The advice most often heard was *komerera*, to keep quiet, stay out of the way."<sup>88</sup>

Likimani uses *Komerera* to portray the ways in which women could not in fact afford to lay low, keep out of trouble, in the stories of Njeri, Nyakio, and Nduta.<sup>89</sup> Just as

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 92.

men were said to have been driven into the forests, unable to tolerate further subjugation and commandeering of the land they loved, Likimani centers women's refusal to *komerera*, reframing patriotic resistance through Kenyan women's lived experiences: "The soil was their lives, giving them strength as they grasped handfuls, smelling it as if it a precious perfume and repeating: 'The soil is ours'" as much as any Kenyan man's.<sup>90</sup> Despite the primary motivation for the women's mission being to seek out their missing husbands, Likimani presents Njeri, Nyakio, Nduta, and the women they meet in their journey as agentic self-actualizing women who manipulate their circumstances to carve out spaces for resistance, particularly collaborative resistance in the face of directives to *komerera*.

Njeri, Nyakio, and Nduta have to consider the reality of their gender as they weight the value of using their wives to score passbooks off the homeguards in order to journey into the city in search of their missing husbands.<sup>91</sup> In this endeavor the dangers they face are of primary concern and directly connected to their status as women, finding no quarter from either homeguard or forest-fighter: "How can we pass all these homeguards and forest-fighters? Where are we going to spend nights?"<sup>92</sup> Women understood the double jeopardy that subsumed their existence, at times caught between the fear of the homeguards and the forest fighters. Complicity with homeguards and state laws was seen as treachery by forest-fighters and put them at risk while at the same time,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

resisting the state put them at risk of violence by the homeguards. In fact as they travel, their greatest fear is not starvation, or even attack by wild animal, it is Nduta's shout of "Men! Men!" that sends her Njeri and Nyakio into a panic.<sup>93</sup> It is forest-fighters, and Nyakio rallies her friends into patriotic performance, offering the men their food and medicine and telling tales of the part the women played in the defense of the resistance.<sup>94</sup> To avoid assault they perform the role of dutiful Kenyan wives, the tales they tell prioritizing their service to the forest-fighters as well as subtly invoking the names of male family members in the resistance in order to present themselves women as mothers and sisters, and therefore worthy of protection not violation.

Women's community building with each other emerges as a form of resistance as they work together to survive.<sup>95</sup> Survival alone was considered impossibility, and necessarily discouraged, any attempts to individual suffering rebuked with a sisterly, "To leave you alone? This is not a time to talk of leaving anybody alone."<sup>96</sup> Women in these communities shared their labor as well as their anxieties, often stating that their "suffering is common to all," the stories of missing husbands and starving children being standard fare among them.<sup>97</sup> As suffering is common to all, Likimani shows that resistance was common to all, and that success in these endeavors required women's collaborative efforts. In fact, the only woman seen to actively work alone without help is

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 100-01.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>95</sup> Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener, *Images of Women in Peace and War : Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives*, Women in Society (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Education in association with the Oxford University Women's Studies Committee, 1987), 92.

<sup>96</sup> Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927 : Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*, 93.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 94.

Nyaguthii, a village informer for the colonial government. All the women are said to hate her, and her individualism and ambition reflect badly not only on her as a person, but also her family. Unlike other women's children, who are communally cared for, Nyaguthii is alone- her children largely neglected by both her and her village.<sup>98</sup> It was said that woman's home would only "get lost" if it belonged to an anti-*Mau Mau* woman.<sup>99</sup> Individual self-concern is unpatriotic and loyalist and punished by excision from the women's community care efforts.

During the Emergency period, the British Colonial government mandated forced communal labor for the people in the rural area villages. It is in the forests surrounding these villages that many *Mau Mau* rebels hid out, assisted by unpaved and familiar terrain as well as the solidarity of some villagers. In response, the government sought to rid the *Mau Mau* of this advantage by improving the infrastructure in the villages, at least as far as building roads that would provide easier access and maneuverability for the homeguards anti-*Mau Mau* operations.<sup>100</sup> Likimani points out that with many of the villages' men hiding out in the forest or otherwise arrested or detained, with a few lucky ones in the cities, like Irungu, the majority of those left behind were women and children.<sup>101</sup> It is these women who are the focus of her second narrative, perhaps it is here Irungu's unnamed wife's story is told.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>99</sup> Macdonald, Holden, and Ardener, *Images of Women in Peace and War : Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives*, 92.

<sup>100</sup> Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927 : Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*, 60.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Likimani provides the reader with glimpses into village women's roles and forms of resistance under colonial rule but before the institution of communal labor. She sets up the weekly market day as the site for women to cross village boundaries and come together to sustain their homes and communities through trade. Market day "was a social event; a day to meet friends, a day to hear news, a day to gossip, a day everybody looked forward to." The important implication here being that Market Day, a time and space always ruled by women, was a day for them to share strategies of resistance and survival with each other, check in, and pass on information and goods.<sup>102</sup> Cognizant of this, the colonial government did their best to monitor these women's space, and often sent in homeguards to intimidate and patrol the market areas. These *askaris* were met with open hostility, though secure in the knowledge that the women could do no more than that. Nevertheless, Likimani's portrayal of the market women openly showing their desire "to tear their oppressors... into small pieces... ready to bite" provides them with some agency, and an active, not passive awareness and reaction to their subjugation as well as a refusal to completely comply, cognizant of their unsafe status as both Kenyan and women.<sup>103</sup> These are not simple or docile village women, in fact they are as fierce as any of the men in the forests, ready to consume their oppressors as they have been consumed. In fact, women in league with loyalists are forced to display docility as a sign of loyalty, the reference to them in this piece as performing happy submissiveness, standing by at a local meeting attended by colonist officers to serve tea and pastries while their market

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

women compatriots wait in the sun for the meeting to begin.<sup>104</sup> Likimani challenges narrative ideas of women as mothers whose primary purpose is to breed and bring up sons for the nationalist cause. In her work, village mothers retain their agency, and are eager to place themselves at the heart of the resistance for their patriotic ideals, absolutely, but also for themselves, for each other.

Likimani also challenges narrative ideas of women as mothers, their primary purpose to breed and bring up sons for the nationalist cause. In her story, village mothers retain their agency, and are eager to place themselves at the heart of the resistance for themselves, their children, and for their patriotic ideals. One woman, Wambui, in response to the violent beating of her youngest son, Kamau, runs to his defense screaming and cursing the *askaris*, jumping into the fray is the Boy's sister, Njeri responding to the anger in her mother's voice and finding her brother bleeding dangerously and her mother attacking the guards "she punched one *askari* and scratched him with her nails... she put his fingers in her mouth" and does not let go until his fingers are almost severed.<sup>105</sup> Resistance, violent bloody, body resistance, is women's work here. Wambui, arrested, wishes that she was a forest-fighter asserting that "this would satisfy her, even if she got killed, at least she would not die like a sheep, not like a woman" or rather not like the Woman the colonists would prefer her to be, docile and submissive,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 68.



even if it means inhabiting the colonists stereotype of the savage *Mau Mau*, always men, fighting for the land.<sup>106</sup>

This image of women doing the consuming instead of being consumed persists. Arrested for her attack, Wambui continues her defiance, further consuming the nationalist cause, it does not consume her: In an ensuing scene, she “she grabs a handful of the soil beneath her in her hands, puts it in her mouth and chews it, saying, ‘Whatever I go through, no matter how I suffer, I suffer for this soil. The soil is ours!’”<sup>107</sup> She understands the cost of resistance may very well be death, and she welcomes them, even stating that “this would solve all her problems,” her readiness to sacrifice her life transforming her into ready nationalist warrior, an identity she does not separate from her motherhood.<sup>108</sup> Likimani also displays the use of the mother’s body as a medium of violence against those who would try violence on her. Calling back to traditional Kenyan beliefs where a naked mother’s body displayed to those younger than her is a terrifying curse, Wambui “slipped off her top shuka and threw it on the ground... by the time she was untying her skirt all the *askaris* had run away” fleeing what they understood to be the worst shame and curse known to them.<sup>109</sup> The mother’s body here is not just a site of violence, as is often the case of women and war, her body is the *medium* of violence against those who would dare violence on her.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Placed in grave danger by forest-fighters seeking her help, another character, Mumbi, makes clear her remembrance of her oath to her nation, “the soil is ours,” that rouses her into action and pushes her past freezing fear.<sup>110</sup> However, much like other women, Mumbi has to find a way to balance her family’s safety with her national duty. Her husband missing and she the only provider, “I am the man and I am the Woman in this house,” suspicion on her household would spell disaster for the children she’d leave behind.<sup>111,112</sup> Likimani writes, “Always with such pain, with such suffering, did the food for the fighters in the forest have safe delivery, and the soil remained ours.”<sup>113</sup> Always with pain and suffering did the women bear out their duty to their families, their community, and their nation, demanding their place in the national histories of the revolution as much as the forest fighter, perhaps more so for the balancing act required by the multiple roles they had to perform to survive.

Despite her choice to shift the narrative of women’s bodies as just sites of violence, Likimani does not undercut embodied realities of what forced communal oppression in a police state meant. Her imagery is visceral, and bears the weight of women’s work, mothers’ work:

“There were lactating mothers, their breasts swollen and dripping with milk which should have been fed to their children, but they had to work. Expectant, underfed mothers had to cope with the forced communal labor... many of the pregnant women had miscarriages... women

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 131.

continued to have miscarriages... dry flabby breasts could no longer suckle the infants who often died.

Those who lived, labored alongside their mothers... thus at forced labor the families toiled... while the London officers commended them on their self-reliance”<sup>114</sup>

Evoking images easily located in narratives of transatlantic slavery conditions, women’s bodies are situated by colonialism as disposable, tireless, and predisposed to subjugation. The loss of life is irrelevant, and only rises as a matter of loss of ready labor to be exploited. Already shaken (patriarchal) familial structures are rearranged, and forced communal labor requires communal survival, led by women’s work. As such, women rely on each other and prioritized each other’s welfare: “The one with food readily fed her neighbors and the children, the one with water gave to her neighbor; firewood was shared; milking was done for everyone;” the communities survival under these traumatic conditions become their avenue of resistance. <sup>115</sup>

Women’s stories in the *Mau Mau* are often mentioned in asides referencing their supportive roles as carriers, wives, prostitutes, cooks, and mothers.<sup>116</sup> Likimani does not necessarily deny these roles, but instead refocuses the narrative around their motivations as they play out different roles of support in the revolution, writing “Without women’s contributions in hiding and feeding the freedom fighters, nothing could have been achieved. It was the women who transported arms and food... it was the women who steered loyalists into the fighter’s traps... it was the women, even the prostitutes, who

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>116</sup> Macdonald, Holden, and Ardener, *Images of Women in Peace and War : Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives*, 88.

stole guns and bullets... it was the women who spied for the freedom fighters...” and they did all this not just for the men, but for themselves and fought out the ideal of the famous saying, “The soil is ours.”<sup>117</sup>

Nyokabi, a squatter on a white colonist’s assumed property, goes about her day, in the *Squatter’s Tragedy* piece; her husband is rude and irritable and generally falls into patriarchal sexist roles that Nyokabi resists in her own way while prioritizing the completion of her other familial duties to the children. Due to the laws, she is forced to work, and sets out, suffering from an unusually bad temper and feeling of trepidation; true enough, she returns home to find her husband and children missing and most likely separated by those who arrested them as *Mau Mau*.<sup>118</sup> Likimani reluctantly but finally explicitly draws out the realities women faced in the colonies. A desolate Nyokabi refuses help from a neighbor, demanding that she be arrested and relocated so that she might be with her children. Crazy with grief at the suspicion that her children might be forever lost to her, Nyokabi goes with her captors but is actively violent towards them. The homeguards follow through on the threat to “inspect her,” a sentiment that has been hinted at before in Likimani’s work, but is only now explicitly related. Nyokabi is “overpowered, bruised, battered, and raped” to unconsciousness.<sup>119</sup> It is important to note however, and Likimani is intentional in this, that Nyokabi is not lost to her violent experience. Within the rather brief relation of this trauma, “Nyokabi who wanted to die did not care but made them know that what they took was through sheer bestiality and

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<sup>117</sup> Likimani, *Passbook Number F.47927 : Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*, 114.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

nothing she would give to the likes of them,” reemphasizing her presence in the narration.<sup>120</sup> This is not meant to lessen the violence of her rape, or the reprehensibility of her attackers, but is meant to center Nyokabi’s sense of self and commitment to her chosen priority, her family, her resistance.

Women in Likimani’s work fight a war on two fronts, against the strictures of their place in patriarchal local society and their place under patriarchal colonialism- both structures seek to take from them what they acknowledge as rightfully theirs, and the women are willing to consume the nation before it consumes them, for it belongs to them as well. Likimani’s writing is grounded in the ways that even through pain and suffering, these mothers bear out their duty to their families, their community, and their nation, demanding their place in the national histories of the revolution as much as the forest fighter, perhaps more so for the balancing act required by the multiple roles they had to perform to survive.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION: “The Soil Is Ours!”

Both *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *Passbook Number F.47927* perform the crucial work of countermemory in order to challenge national collective memories of the *Mau Mau* uprisings and their contribution to post-colonial Kenya’s nation building project. The characters in both these pieces draw from a variant of autochthony discourse, one that highlights their claim to the land as the rightful products, producers, consumers of the land.<sup>121</sup> Their shared project, both pieces markedly displace colonial claims to the land as well as colonial constructions of colonization as a benevolent project. Kenyans are the subject of their own histories and memory, these stories contributing to the national memory of resistance and the fight for independence that is intrinsic to Kenya’s post-colonial nation-making project.

To create this countermemory, the strategies employed in both pieces differ. In *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the authors pivot their work around a male national hero, telling a story of nation building caught up in narratives of heteropatriarchy- not too different from the colonial strictures it seeks to upend. Women bear the nation, their femininity and womanliness hinging upon their ability to mother the boys and men who are cast as the primary warriors of resistance. Their identities are unimportant and subsumed in this nation making project and are lauded only if they exemplify this construction of Mother Kenya. They are all but excluded from the role of warrior that is idealized as crucial and of all importance to the resistance. In this exclusion is an unintentional subversiveness.

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<sup>121</sup> Kevin C. Dunn, "Sons of the Soil and Contemporary State Making: Autochthony, Uncertainty and Political Violence in Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2009): 131.

The space left for only men to occupy and aspire to results in a particular homoerotic that is elided by narratives of resistance and nation building. Subsuming homosociality by couching it in terms of the greater good- resistance and freedom- men create elaborate fantasies and mythologies and legitimize the exclusion of women from their space. Thus aggressive heterosexuality and sexism unintentionally but nevertheless result in a queer erotic as the ultimate masculinity.

*Passbook* is threaded all through with women's names, their stories, their embodied knowledges and material realities. Likimani pushes no part of their womanhood out to hold space for a symbolic mother- always clear is that freedom and the fight for was in fact, and at all stages, women's work. Her Mother Kenya is not ephemeral, nameless, pure, clean, or shadowed. If there is to be Mother Kenya for Likimani, she is a multifaceted, uneasy, and discomfiting, amalgamation of the mothers in her work, and they are physical, wear their names proudly, have dirt and blood under their fingernails, and stand in the light and consume the soil. These women do not fit easily within an archive of nation that would prefer a sanitized version of their motherhood, and Likimani provides a countermemory to wa Thiongo's own countermemory, that further disrupts the archive of history and memory and creates a space, not just for Mother Kenya, but Mothers of Kenya at the head of table. Her countermemory creation refuses to be fit for archive consumption.

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